

LISTENING HEARTS MINISTRIES

EXPLORATIONS

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Living the Questions

Amy Frazier
Bristol, VA

Pearls of wisdom, words to live by, life lessons. We receive them from loved ones, teachers, even strangers on the street. During a recent Listening Hearts training workshop, I found myself reexploring some life lessons in the context of spiritual discernment. One lesson my dad taught me was “Just ask the question.” As a teen I sometimes prefaced a question with an elaborate preamble, thinking to maximize my chances of getting the response I desired. “Dad, there’s going to be a school trip to France, and my summer job doesn’t start until the week afterward, and I’ve already got spending money saved, and” When I finally drew breath, Dad would interject, “So what’s the question?” My preoccupation with getting the answer I wanted distracted me from ever really asking a question at all.

During the June workshop, I was offered the opportunity to participate in a spiritual discernment session. I found myself wrestling with getting my focus question just right. If I say “X” will I mislead the discerners? Should I provide some context for my question before I present it? Will the time together be fruitful, blessed by the Spirit? My fingers were tense, my teeth were clenched, and my mind flitted from one anxiety to another, never settling. Then I remembered “Just ask the question.” I also recalled, from *Listening Hearts*,

“Avoid explaining the reason for the question. . . . wait silently to let the question develop and come into clearer focus.” (p. 81)

“Prayerfully formulated questions invite the movement of God’s Spirit. . . . Questions stimulate further [prayerful] listening.” (p. 62)

Evidently I hadn’t learned Dad’s lesson very well. My preoccupation with the question’s “packaging” was again distracting me from its heart. In spiritual discernment, the point is not the question’s perfect wording but God’s participation in the process.

Aha! And so, I drew a deep breath, gathered my rambling thoughts, and entered “the Lord’s reception room.”¹ With the renewed quiet of my body and mind, God’s Spirit entered the conversation—and the focus question came forth.

It’s been several weeks now, and I’m still revisiting that discernment session. Is doing so good? We may enter a discernment session hoping for spiritual consensus, “a way of sensing the will of God” (*LH*, p. 62), but we need to avoid equating a “successful” discernment session with one that yields immediate clarity. Again I remember: “for now we see through a glass, darkly; then face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12). All our best intentions to open our ears and hearts to God’s Spirit and all our best attempts to practice spiritual discernment in its fullness may not yield the clarity, insight, or response we seek. Instead, sometimes we’re simply left to live with the question we brought to the discernment session in the first place. And that’s OK—God is in this living.

How do we “live the questions”²? For me, it’s rather like going shopping with my four young daughters. Having them holding hands as I pull them along doesn’t work. Neither do we march lock-step five abreast through the aisles. Nor does each of us fix her gaze unswervingly on the ultimate goal. Instead, through nudges, bumps, and simple gestures, we manage to keep within eye contact of each other as we navigate the displays of goods.

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Living the questions of spiritual discernment involves similar nudges and gestures. An image from my discernment session floats up, its movement capturing my attention. In my mind, I grasp the image, examine all its facets, consider it from all angles, asking myself, “Where is God in this?” Then I release the image. Thus the Spirit nudges me. Sometimes an incident during my day reminds me of the discernment session—the words, the tone, the atmosphere. Through this memory, God points me along the way—his way. The route I expected would not have the switchbacks, detours, and S-curves of God’s path. But the sense of peace accompanying this holy to-and-fro’ing turns a circuitous journey into a hope-filled, joyous waltz.

Amy Frazier, a veterinarian by training, is a freelance medical and scientific editor. She and her husband, an Episcopal priest and fellow writer for Explorations, are the proud parents of four young daughters.

¹ Timothy Ware, ed. *The Art of Prayer: An Orthodox Anthology* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p.187.

² Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, translated by Stephen Mitchell (New York: Random House, 1984), quoted in *Listening Hearts*, p. 75.

Anxiety and a Listening Heart

**The Rev. Monique Ellison
Baltimore, MD**

There is this pattern in my life. When I am living with a good deal of anxiety, I am more likely to trust in my own will and quick wits than to listen for God's will. I am more likely to sit and contemplate and listen during the calm stretches. I would be better served to sit in silence waiting for God's guidance when I am feeling anxious. The true path God has in mind for me would set free the person I am meant to be in ways far better than anything I can muscle out on my own.

This pattern happens in institutions and organizations, too. I am the pastor of a very small congregation in Baltimore. For the last two decades, the people of this congregation have worked hard to keep the place open. The nickname for the parish has long been "Church of the Insurrection." This faithful handful of parishioners, living under the constant threat of closure, have survived largely out of sheer stubbornness. In our common life, we have operated in anxiety mode, doing what we always have. We are set in our ways. It is easier to stay the same than to risk embarking on some strange course. Decision making is hard – too many choices, or perhaps too few. The solutions don't always feel satisfying. The anxiety increases, and that makes it hard to hear the Spirit.

Anxiety can be paralyzing. It is when I reach paralyzed desperation that I sit still for even a moment and hear God's leading. Eventually, in spite of myself, the stubbornness melts under the warmth of God's love.

The key is to realize that we are not alone. We have never been alone. "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth . . . a wind from God swept over the face of the waters" (Gen.1:1-2, NRSV). God's Spirit has been blowing over us, surrounding and guiding us since before there was us. Christian scripture is full of the stories of God's faithfulness to us—and of our reluctance to follow. We become more and more reluctant every time the anxiety level increases, and still God shows up.

God's ultimate show of faith is the Incarnation. The Word of God, the Breath, the Spirit of God is made flesh in Jesus Christ and dwells among us. Jesus models for us a relationship with God, with the Spirit that guides us, our Source. At the moments when there seemed to be not enough, Jesus prayed. At the times when things seemed hopeless, Jesus turned to God. In the extremely anxious hours before the cross, Jesus trusted and followed. And we have all been redeemed by this trust. The Spirit that made resurrection possible for Jesus is given to us. There is no threat that can overcome God's love.



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MISSION STATEMENT

Listening Hearts Ministries provides a range of programs, publications, and services that teach people the practice of spiritual discernment through prayerful listening in supportive communities.

Discernment is a gift from God. But it also includes an intentional attempt on our part to hear God's call in our life. It takes work; it is also a matter of grace.

—Listening Hearts, p. 24

It seems that the entire Diocese of Maryland wants this little church to flourish. It is the Church of the Resurrection after all. That name comes with a promise of new life, doesn't it. But who knows how that life will be manifested.

For decades, the people who have worshiped here have done their best to keep things going under a good deal of pressure. All of a sudden, some new energy and creativity are being focused in this place. The church leaders have agreed to come together in prayer and spiritual discernment, to try to hear what God has in store for us. We are ready for something new. And that something new will come from our Source rather than from our fear. Our collective stubbornness could be melting.

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When we are listening, God calls us to be the best of what we are created to be.*

When anxiety is winning, we are making decisions so that we can survive. When we are listening, God calls us to be the best of what we are created to be. Discernment comes from a "desire to know God" (*Listening Hearts*, p.29) and the willingness to sit with God. Anxiety makes us see only what it takes to survive and keep going as best we can. Discernment takes us, even under pressure, through "a process that cleanses our vision to see what is true and frees our will to act on what we see" (*LH*, p. 30).

The Rev. Monique Ellison is passionate about community, discipleship, and the Church. She serves as both vicar of the Church of the Resurrection in Baltimore, Maryland, and associate for client development and evangelism for Listening Hearts Ministries.